April 28, 2003

Paris and Berlin prepare alliance to rival Nato

FROM CHARLES BREMNER IN PARIS

EUROPE'S self-inflicted wounds over Iraq will be on display tomorrow, when the leaders of France and Germany — dubbed the "Axis of Weasels" in America — start to try to lay the groundwork for a European Union military alliance that would compete with Nato.

At a meeting in Brussels with the Prime Ministers of Belgium and Luxembourg, President Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, the German Chancellor, want to clear the way for a common European defence system that would start with a core of volunteer states.

Although the Germans have qualms about a confrontation with Nato, the French are not hiding their aim to achieve their long-standing goal of unhitching the United States from European defence. This has become more pressing with the reported plans of the US to punish France for its stand on the war in Iraq by excluding it from Nato decision-making.

Last night, however, Tony Blair gave warning to M Chirac against placing Europe as a rival to the United States, calling such a move "destabilising". In an interview with the *Financial Times*, he said: "I am not really interested in talk about punishing countries, but I think there is an issue that we have to resolve here between America and Europe and within Europe about Europe's attitutde towards the transatlantic alliance.

"I don't want Europe setting itself up in opposition to America. I think it will be dangerous and destabilising."

The mechanism for founding what would be a unified EU military force was tabled last week without much fanfare by the chiefs of the convention that is drafting a new EU constitution. The arrangement, akin to the foundation of monetary union, would be far more ambitious than the existing European security and defence policy that was launched by Britain and France in 1998. That policy, which includes a rapid reaction force, is limited to humanitarian, peacekeeping and crisis management in co-operation with Nato.

Although Guy Verhofstadt, the Belgian Prime Minister, proposed the mini-summit months ago, London and other EU capitals view the Brussels initiative as akin to provocation by the four most active opponents of American policy over Iraq.

Despite denials from Paris and Berlin, the session looks like a manoeuvre by French-led "old Europe" against the pro-Atlantic axis, led by Britain and Spain and featuring new EU states, which Donald Rumsfeld, the US Defence Secretary, called "new Europe".

TIMES ONLINE SPORTSBOOK

Britain, which has the EU's most powerful Armed Forces, was not invited. Nor were the leaders of the EU's other main pro-Atlantic states — Spain, Italy and the Netherlands.

Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, said that the Brussels meeting "risks sending a message of division about the the creation of a defence policy separate from Nato". Britain was adamant that the EU's present security arrangement had nothing to do with a common defence, which was the domain of Nato, Mr Hoon told a French newspaper.

Britain is especially opposed to the French-backed idea of creating an EU military general staff, but it supports the view, shared by France and the others, that the EU needs to raise defence spending and to create a centralised arms agency, which would avoid duplication and help competition with the American defence industry.

While Europe's split over Iraq has given impetus to the defence initiative, the project has been looming since the 1950s and in particular since President de Gaulle took France out of the Nato military structure in 1967. Differences over autonomy from Nato were buried and not resolved after M Chirac and Tony Blair launched their security initiative in St Malo in 1998.

The confrontation with the United States over Iraq was seen by M Chirac and his allies as a coming-of-age test that the expanding Union had failed. To become a real power, the EU must, in their eyes, define itself as a "balance" against the United States. An independent defence force is a primary condition for confirming Europe's identity as more than an economic bloc, they say.

Extending the defence concept over the weekend, Michele Alliot-Marie, the French Defence Minister who was visiting Moscow, sought to involve Russia, the ally of France and Germany in the anti-war front over Iraq, saying that "Russia should be associated with the planning work that we are carrying out".

Britain and other opponents of the plan point out that even with French power, the proposed four-nation core marshals only 35 per cent of EU defence spending. Britain is likely to oppose inclusion in the new constitution of the machinery for creating a defence alliance.

Spending power

Germany
Defence budget: £16.9bn
Armed Forces: 296,000

France
Defence budget: £20.1bn
Armed Forces:260,400

United Kingdom
Defence budget: £29.3bn
Armed Forces: 210,450

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Bush: Harming a Fetus Should Be Fed Crime

Fri Apr 25, 6:09 PM ET

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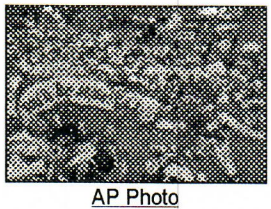
WASHINGTON - The White House urged Congress on Friday to pass a law making it a federal crime to harm a fetus during an assault on its mother, a subject currently in the news in connection with a California murder case.


AP Photo

The House passed legislation in 2001 supported by President Bush (news - web sites) that would make it a criminal offense to injure or kill a fetus during the commission of a violent crime. The Senate never took up the measure.

Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer (news - web sites) declined to comment specifically on the California case in which Scott Peterson (news - web sites) has been charged with murdering his wife, Laci, and their unborn child.

But asked whether it is appropriate for the husband to be charged with two murders, Fleischer responded that the president believes that "when an unborn child is injured or killed during the commission of a crime of violence, the law should recognize what most people immediately recognize, and that is that such a crime has two victims."

Peterson pleaded innocent on Monday. Laci Peterson (news - web sites), who was eight months pregnant, disappeared on Christmas Eve, and the bodies washed ashore last week in San Francisco Bay, three miles from where Scott Peterson had said he was fishing.

California law permits a murder charge for a fetus if a pregnant woman is slain.

"The president calls on the House and calls on the Senate to again pass the Unborn Victims of Violence Act," Fleischer said.

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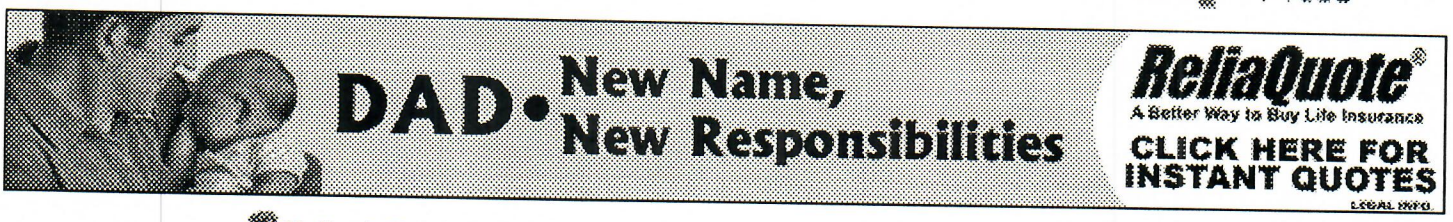

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Forest Service Blocks E-Mail Comments

Fri Apr 25,10:35 PM ET Add White House - AP Cabinet & State to My Yahoo!

By MATTHEW DALY, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - In a move criticized by both environmentalists and business groups, the U.S. Forest Service is rejecting public comments on proposed rule changes when they come from certain e-mail servers or on preprinted post cards.

A spokesman said the agency is not barring all e-mail — only e-mail that goes through an outside server such as a business or environmental Web site. The agency is also barring other "duplicative materials" such as form letters, printed post cards and lists that include spaces for respondents to check off statements they agree with.

Such comments, whether electronic or on paper, can be overwhelming and provide little useful information, said Forest Service spokesman Joseph Walsh. The Forest Service has counted such comments in the past, he said, adding that the new policy is subject to review.

"A bunch of e-mails that say the same thing with no specific comments don't tell us anything," Walsh said. Under the new policy, thousands of comments routed through such third-party servers were bounced back to users by the Forest Service.

Civil liberties groups and activists on both sides of forest debates complain that the Forest Service is thwarting public access to decision makers and reducing the role of average citizens in shaping forest policy.

Environmental groups and businesses increasingly encourage people who agree with their positions to contact the government through their Web sites. Many also use preprinted letters and cards so members of the public can easily express their opinions to government officials.

"By ignoring public comments, the Bush administration is telling the average person, 'Don't bother telling us what you think or how you feel, because we are not listening'," said Robert Vandermark, co-director of the Heritage Forests Campaign, an environmental advocacy group.

But Walsh said the Forest Service is still accepting originally composed e-mail and letters from the public.

"If you're going to take the time to respond and you care, then put some effort into it," he said. "We'll take e-mails by the millions" if the correspondence is original and specific.

But critics say the new rule ignores a fact of modern life: that people are busy and often don't have time to compose original letters with substantive suggestions or criticisms.

Comments sent from a Web site are different from "spam" and other unwanted e-mail, because each person has to decide whether to send an e-mail and where, said Cindy Cohn, legal director of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a San Francisco-based group that promotes online civil liberties.

"If they are blocking Viagra ads, that's one thing," Cohn said. "If they are blocking public comments, that's not spam — that's thwarting democracy. It's an issue of public access."

The foundation's Web site includes an "action center" that allows users to send comments to government officials with the click of a button. At least 130,000 e-mail messages have been sent to Congress through the site since last year, Cohn said.

A spokesman for the American Forest and Paper Association, a business group, agreed.

"It's a step backward to block e-mail," said spokesman John Mechem, whose organization features a "Washington Watch" link on its Web site,

The Heritage Forests campaign and other groups have similar links.

Just because a Web site user agrees with a comment suggested by a particular Web site does not make that person's opinion irrelevant, Cohn said.

"If one person has a problem with a new road or other policy, or if 100,000 people have the same problem, that's a substantive difference," she said.

On the Net:

Forest Service: http:www.fs.fed

Heritage Forests Campaign: http:www.ourforests.org

Electronic Frontier Foundation: http://www.eff.com

American Forest and Paper Association: http://www.afandpa.org

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